

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Hawthorn and river birch are two of my favorite winter trees

The grays of winter have settled in and there's not much exciting going on in most landscapes, so it's a great time of year for plants with more than one season of interest to show off. Ornamental grasses and plants with berries or peeling bark or thorns or cones can really add another dimension to the scenery. Deciduous shrubs have long since lost their leaves and are just bare sticks this time of year, except a few like red-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) and winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) that really stand out.

Most deciduous trees are relegated to being just gray skeletons waiting for spring. But a few, like the 'Winter King' hawthorn (*Crataegus viridis* 'Winter King'), are covered in berries and in their full winter splendor right now.

This small to medium (25 feet tall x 25 feet wide) tree is not just a winter beauty; it dresses up the landscape all year. In mid-spring this tree is loaded with clusters of delicate, white, 5-petaled flowers.

As the flowers fade, the green, glossy leaves appear. The lustrous three-to-five-lobed, maple-like leaves densely cover the tree all summer and turn orange to scarlet in the fall. This tree's crisp, bright green foliage and tidy habit make it an outstanding smaller specimen tree for any landscape.

Apple trees, hawthorns and some other members of the rose family have a problem with rust, a fungal disease that needs two hosts to survive. Cedar-hawthorn rust alternates between hawthorns and the native eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*).

Leaves of infected hawthorns develop red or brown spots with yellow halos. On the underside of the leaf, "horns" poke out from the spots and release spores into the air, completing the cycle.

Fortunately, the 'Winter King' hawthorn is resistant to cedar-hawthorn rust and the leaves are rarely affected, staying glossy green all summer. In most years this tree produces a bumper crop of bright red, shiny, pea-sized berries that persist through the winter.

This tree is broad and upright, but its branches have a distinctly horizontal habit and it soon becomes almost as wide as high. The gray bark is smooth on young twigs and fissured and flaky on older trunks, often patched with an orange-brown color.

Most hawthorns, including the Washington hawthorn (*C. phaenopyrum*), have thorns up to three inches long. However, the thorns of the 'Winter King' are smaller, only 1.5 inches long. Because of their thorns, hawthorns make excellent barrier plantings. Because they are so dense, they make excellent deciduous screens or windbreak plants. Even in the winter, the dense branching habit offers both visual protection and dispersal of winter wind.

'Winter King' is hardy in zones 5 to 8, perfect for most areas of Virginia. It tolerates a wide range of soils and will grow in full sun to partial shade. While this tree makes an excellent specimen plant by itself, planting it in groupings of three makes a spectacular display.

Speaking of groupings, the native river birch (*Betula nigra*), usually grown as a multi-trunk tree, can make a real dramatic statement when planted in groups. A grove of river birches against a dark evergreen background or around a water feature is quite striking.

This tree's calling card is its exfoliating bark, peeling off to reveal a colorful inner bark that is cinnamon-brown on the species and white to pinkish white on the popular cultivar 'Heritage'.

Birches are known for their ability to withstand extremely cold temperatures and for being able to bend under heavy snow and ice loads without breaking. Another great trait of the river birch in particular is its ability to withstand southern summers. Unlike other birches, which succumb to heat stress and eventually become infected with the bronze birch borer, the river birch handles the heat and is resistant to this destructive insect.

When the river birch leafs out in the spring, its bright green leaves provide an open, airy canopy that allows plenty of light to reach plants below. Though not consistent from year to year, its fall color is a butter-yellow.

This tree naturally grows along streams and riverbanks, but it will live in drier conditions, once it becomes established. Plant it in the spring, mulch well and water regularly, especially the first year.

River birch likes a loose, slightly acid soil, or it may suffer from iron chlorosis and its leaves turn sickly yellow-green.

Many people in the South have learned that planting a 'Heritage' river birch is wiser than attempting to grow a white or paper bark birch because of the problem with the bronze birch borer. Although the 'Heritage' doesn't have the bright white bark, it is in many ways a superior tree.

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